



THE ROYAL ELEPHANT-HUNTERS.

THE following account of elephant-stalking in the easterly cliffs of the Abyssinian range of mountains is given by the Duke of Saxe-Coburg:—

“Elephants in the mountains? No huntsman or friend of nature will believe it. But, however they may shake their heads in astonishment, there they are nevertheless. It is a peculiarity of that vast range, which in the east almost reaches the Red Sea, in the north runs out into the deserts of Habab, and in the west into the lowlands of Barka—being only in the south connected with the mountainous countries of Hamarfen—to be visited in regular intervals by large troops of elephants. They do not stay in the valleys and on the table-lands, as would seem more probable, but chiefly occupy the highest and roughest cliffs.

They move on and change their places three or four times a year, being in all probability connected with those large flocks which in the low countries of Central Africa lead a migratory life, and, according to Vogel and the few other Europeans who have penetrated so far, have rendered themselves masters of these regions.

The mountains in question consist mostly of coarse-grained granite and mica slate, and rise up to an elevation of about 9,000 feet. A thick vegetation covers them, changing by degrees according to the height of the mountain, on the tops of which our native European shrubs and plants are growing. The tropical vegetation is, besides, quite different from that of America and Asia: it resembles in its appearance rather more the mountains of Upper Austria and the Bavarian Alps. The thermo-

meter is supposed never to sink to the freezing point, and even on the highest tops you feel the beams of a tropical sun. The year has two summers and two winters, and all seasons are refreshed by storms.

To our own astonishment we met with elephants' traces before we expected, viz., in our second day's journey in the narrow valley of Mensa, after having crossed the Samhara. The eyes of the hunters beamed with joy; but we scarcely believed in what we saw, and were greatly afraid of mistake and disappointment: for how should elephants come to these places? Our doubts vanished, however, by degrees, and our misgivings were relieved as we proceeded. There were cracked branches and young trees all around us, and likewise some traces in the loamy sand.

When, however, in our third day's journey we ascended the table-land of the Mensa, we lost those traces again, and thought that some stray elephants had only crossed the Mensa valley. But after remaining in Mensa for some days, and roving with indefatigable eagerness through the surrounding mountains, we soon learnt something more of the peculiar habits of those migrating elephant tribes. The indigenous inhabitants told us that these strange animals were within a few weeks sure to make a short stay in the immediate neighbourhood of Mensa. More certain and trustworthy accounts were not to be had, since no elephant-hunter was to be met with, the thin population of Bogos being, as a rule, no huntsmen. But, after having left Mensa and crossed the Aimsaba river, we had the good chance to meet an elephant-hunter at Keren, who joined us to consult our physician about a lingering disease. It



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is mainly to this incident that we owe our nearer acquaintance with the monsters.

After our return to Mensa, I charged S. with searching the neighbouring mountains, in order to learn where the elephants stayed. He returned very soon with the excellent news of having met with three flocks of elephants on the steep cliffs of the Beit Shakhan, one of the highest mountains of this neighbourhood. He had seen them feeding quietly, which told well for their not being likely to leave these plains soon again. We resolved at once to make a hunting expedition. Your obedient servant, my nephew Herman S., and my German huntsman were to form the vanguard, in order to spy out the position of the elephants, and to make the plan of attack accordingly. My second nephew, Edward, the English consul, the Dutch baron, and a second elephant-hunter, whom we had found out by mere chance among our muleteers, had to follow and to meet us on a certain point. Our German footman and a native had to carry some victuals on their backs. The rest of the company of huntsmen were either indisposed or not willing to join the hazardous adventure.

We started at three o'clock in the morning, under the most brilliant moonshine, and ascended without interruption in the traces of elephants or other animals until nine o'clock. We had to cross the mountains bordering on the Mensa valley in order to reach another range. After a short stop, we made at noon the tops of the Beit Shakhan, probably the end of the Merrara range, which we estimated from 8,000 to 9,000 feet high. S. had, as he stated, from this point seen elephants. The prospect was large enough, indeed, a panorama being before us, the like of which I have seen only in a few places of the Tyrol or Switzerland. An unbounded sea of green and brown hills, in the finest and softest outlines, and then again stretching forth sharp-marked rocks, in picturesque shapes and

admirable juxtaposition. A golden streak in the far-distant east pointed out the waves of the Red Sea; in all other directions mountain followed mountain, all about of the same height. Had we met no elephants, the difficult ascent of those alps would still have been sufficiently rewarded through the indescribable prospect we enjoyed from this point. Our friends had met us, and we strengthened ourselves by a luncheon. The sun shone scorching hot, but a cool breeze refreshed us at the same time, and, stretched out in the high grass, we revelled in the enjoyment of the beauties of nature.

Nowhere on the cliffs were elephants to be seen with the aid of our best telescope, and I began to doubt if the whole tale of elephants was not a mere myth, and sent two huntsmen to the deeper cliffs, which, by the peculiar formation of the range, were concealed and invisible for our eyes. We agreed upon a certain signal after which we should follow the huntsmen.

It was about two or three o'clock in the afternoon, when the ear of one of the young natives in our company was struck with a sound which the others were scarcely able to perceive. With the sudden impulse and elasticity of a serpent, this black naked fellow jumped up from the grass, and his excitement showed in strange and violent gesticulation that he had heard the signal. He answered at once with a shrill yelling cry, and then a second one carried along by the light mountain air resounded in our ears from the abyss underneath. We jumped on our feet and seized our rifles. The charming view, and our weariness, all were gone; the beams of the sun were scorching no longer; and without considering what now ought to be done, and what was the meaning of the signal, the whole company trotted forth over stones and rocks and holes towards the valley, whence in several intervals the signal was repeated.

The young native, with shield and lance, led the way, and not being impeded in his course by garments, or by the bulk of his body, he soon fell into a really dangerous movement, which none but young and vigorous legs were able to follow. The English consul and our German provision carrier fell back. The others, however, kept together like a pack of well-trained dogs. It took an hour and a-half before we met the two elephant-hunters. But then we had to follow only from 200 to 300 yards, when on the opposite rock-wall, between brushwood and euphorbia trees, we saw elephants quietly taking their dinner. On another cliff, at a greater distance, we observed through the telescope a more numerous troop of elephants.

This was the time to form a council of war, and to accomplish our designs of attack, according to previous agreement. But the excited natives gave us no time. S. seized my arm, shook it as if to shake apples from a tree, and, with grim gestures, pointing to the feeding elephants, bore me away. Herman and my huntsman followed, whilst the other savage laid hold of Edward and the baron, to disappear with them in another direction. We could only guess that the huntsmen intended to bring me and Herman to a good place for stalking an elephant, whilst the other gentlemen were placed safely near the road of the retreating beasts. This view proved afterwards to be correct.

Onwards we went again in full race through aloe and mimosas. Our shirts and trowsers were soon torn to rags, and the scorching sun bathed us in perspiration. At once the huntsman stopped short, made a furious grimace, and pushed upon my shoes with the long barrel of his musket. He wished evidently that hence I should walk barefooted like himself. But I gave him to understand, by an equally grim mien and significant gesture, that the soles of our feet were not, like his own, prepared for thorns

and sharp stones; and onward again, down a declivity, across a ravine, and opposite up a steep wall. We followed, in the else impenetrable brushwood, exactly the narrow paths the monsters in feeding had trodden down a minute before. Down another wall, and we were just about to cross a second ravine, when, at fifty yards' distance, we saw four elephants engaged in the same purpose. All were breathless. I raised my rifle to take aim at the biggest of the elephants; but the huntsman seized my arm, and made such a fearful grimace, that I could not but think that in his estimation the distance was still too great.

The elephants, which have no sharp eyesight, passed by. As soon, however, as they had reached the other side, our race on their traces began again; the huntsman's intention was, evidently, that we should come up with them at only a few yards' distance. We were all in a fever of expectation, almost unable to mind the danger which threatened us. After the lapse of a few minutes, in which we, jumping from rock to rock, pursued the trace downwards, we met the first of the elephants on a sudden, and at three yards' distance. The beasts had turned their steps backwards. One yard onward, and every one of us would have been crushed to atoms.

The huntsman, with full presence of mind, gave a yelling cry, and down he jumped into the thickest of cactus plants, which was about ten feet underneath the place where we stood. We all followed instinctively his example. Bruised and scratched, we stooped behind a rock like a covey of partridges under a sheltering bush. The elephants, startled by the unexpected sight, made half a turn to the right, and just showed their broad flanks in a slanting downhill direction at from ten to fifteen yards' distance.

The moment for action had arrived. The huntsman, Herman, and myself were at the same time on the rock, which had

saved us; our rifles were on our cheeks, and four pointed bullets were fired behind the monster's colossal ear. The elephant was hit mortally.

A second elephant crossed the way of his wounded companion. He received from Herman a bullet in the flank, which caused him to ejaculate the same cry of agony, but made him only accelerate his escape. Our first friend tottered from one side to the other, slowly trying to turn himself round. Then our huntsman whose musket had five times missed fire, gave him the finishing shot through the heart. Down he went, and rolled down the mountain to a distance of 300 yards, crushing trees and shrubs before him. The path he had levelled by his rolling body resembled the trace of an avalanche, which chamois hunters often see in the mountains. We followed the dying giant with shouts of triumph, and found him hemmed in between two blocks of granite, still struggling with his feet violently. We should have been inconsiderate enough to climb down the last rock to approach him, unless S. had stopped us almost by force. He pointed at the same time at an advancing young elephant.

We were in a difficult situation again—some hanging, some sitting, some lying, in the cliffs, Herman stooping down on an isolated rock, from which he could only go downhill, not upwards to where we were.

I opened fire upon the young animal, and with two bullets at twenty yards' distance, well aimed upon his flank, brought him down on his knees. But he rose again, and, running over roots and rocks in a fury, attempted to attack Herman. He, however, being fortunately on too high a seat to be knocked over, and just high enough to send his bullet into the enemy's skull, finished him instantly.

The herd of devastating animals had got a good fright, and the dead prey proved a welcome boon to the natives.

The highest excitement was over, and the last beams of the scorching sun shone upon the scene of our wild adventure. A few minutes after, being almost rendered speechless by fatigue and exertion, we stood on the colossal corpse of the old elephant. Edward and the baron arrived soon afterwards. They had been placed too deep, and the other elephants must have got the wind from them; for in these mountains likewise, as in the Alps, the sun causes the wind to blow upwards from the valleys to the tops.

The night came on at a sudden, as is usual in tropical countries. Where should we find shelter or a drop of water? After a long search we found a green puddle, from which we quenched our thirst, and a small plain rock on which we resolved to make our night quarters. The few victuals, which were intended for a lunch only, were soon consumed. A fire was lit to protect us against the roving beasts of prey, and branches were brought together to make a provisional camp.

While making these arrangements, we missed, to our great bewilderment, the German, who had to carry our coats and a few biscuits. He was said to have been missed for four or five hours. What could have become of him? Shots were fired, the aborigines were sent out, shouts were raised, hunting-horns sounded, until at last one of our retinue met him behind a shrub, where he had fallen asleep, exhausted through hunger and fatigue. He was brought up to the fire, to our great satisfaction, as we should have been very sorry to leave the poor fellow alone in such a desert.

Heavy sleep oppressed the fortunate huntsmen, who, however, were soon enough awakened again by the chill dew and the first beams of the rising sun. After a slow return we reached our camp at Mensa, exhausted by hunger, late in the afternoon; but what are fatigues and privations in comparison to such a hunting-day?"